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Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 14283

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, BE
SUBJECT: BELGIAN DOMESTIC POLITICAL SCENE ON THE EVE OF PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS' DEPARTURE FOR THE UNITED STATES

SUMMARY: DESPITE A LARGE PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY, THE SECOND TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT IS PROCEEDING CAUTIOUSLY, COUNTING LIKE MICAWBER ON SOMETHING TO TURN UP TO EASE THE COUNTRY'S PERSISTENT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL MALAISE. ALTHOUGH SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS AND INTERNAL TENSIONS TROUBLE THE ACTION OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT, IT APPEARS SECURE IN THE NEAR TERM AND LIKELY TO RUN FOR SOME TIME. AS THE HEAD OF THAT GOVERNMENT, TINDEMANS WILL VISIT THE UNITED STATES AS BELGIUM'S MOST POPULAR POLITICAL FIGURE OF THE POST-WW II ERA. END SUMMARY.

1. ON HIS DEPARTURE FOR THE UNITED STATES PRIME MINISTER LEO TINDEMANS WILL LEAVE BEHIND HIM A FOUR-MONTH OLD GOVERNMENT ONLY JUST BEGINNING TO COME TO GRIPS WITH A WORSENING ECONOMIC SITUATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF IMPLEMENTING A CONTROVERSIAL PLAN FOR DECENTRALIZATION OF THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT ALONG REGIONAL/ LINGUISTIC LINES.

ALTHOUGH THE TINDEMANS COALITION REPRESENTS MORE THAN 80 OF THE SEATS IN THE LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT, IT IS PROCEEDING CONFIDENTIAL

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CAUTIOUSLY. TO DATE THE ONLY INTERESTS MILDLY DISTURBED BY GOVERNMENT POLICIES ARE THE MIDDLE-INCOME GROUP (BY A MODEST TAX INCREASE) AND ORGANIZED LABOR (BY GOVERNMENT OPPOSITION TO ITS DEMAND FOR A SHORTER WORKWEEK). THE GOVERNMENT'S LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM FOR CALENDAR 1978 IS CAUTIOUS AND UNCONTROVERSIAL, SEEMINGLY AIMED PRIMARILY AT AVOIDING SERIOUS CONFRONTATION WITH VESTED INTERESTS. NOTHING HAS BEEN DONE TOWARD REFORM OF PUBLIC

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FINANCES, A PROMINENT ITEM IN THE PROGRAM OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT AS IT TOOK OFFICE. THOUGH THE ECONOMY IS STILL WAITING FOR THE BETTER DAYS THAT HAVEN'T COME, STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS ABOUND AND UNEMPLOYMENT CONTINUES TO RISE, THE SECOND TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT HAS NOT TAKEN ALARM - AT LEAST PUBLICLY.

2. IN ITS LETHARGY IT APPEARS TO REFLECT ACCURATELY THE MOOD OF THE COUNTRY. INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS, INDUSTRY SPOKESMAN AND LABOR LEADERS ARE TELLING EACH OTHER THAN THINGS ARE BAD - AND CALL ON SOMEONE ELSE TO MAKE THE NECESSARY SACRIFICE. THE MAN IN THE STREET, WELL-CUSHIONED FROM ADVERSITY BY A GENEROUS SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM, IS LIKEWISE SANGUINE ABOUT A DEMONSTRABLY UNHEALTHY ECONOMIC SITUATION. ONLY IN THE HARDEST-HIT SECTORS (STEEL, TEXTILES, GLASS, SHOES) AND REGIONS (ATHUS, CHARLEROI) HAS PUBLIC UNEASE MANIFESTED ITSELF.

3. DESPITE AN OBJECTIVE SITUATION THAT OFFERS LITTLE REASON FOR OPTIMISM AND THE DO-LITTLE PERFORMANCE SO FAR OF HIS SECOND GOVERNMENT, TINDEMANS REMAINS OVERWHELMINGLY BELGIUM'S MOST POPULAR POLITICIAN. HIS PERSONALITY DOMINATES A GOVERNMENT THAT HAS YET TO ACQUIRE SHARP POLITICAL PROFILE. THERE IS ONLY ONE UNANNOUNCED CHALLENGER TO HIS DOMINATION OF THE BELGIAN POLITICAL ARENA. HE IS TINDEMANS' FOREIGN MINISTER, HENRI SIMONET, WHO WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY BE CHOSEN PRIME MINISTER WERE HIS SOCIALIST PARTY TO FORM A GOVERNMENT. SIMONET HAS SET OUT TO PLACE HIS PERSONAL STAMP ON BELGIUM'S FOREIGN POLICY, WHICH HAD BEEN PRETTY CONFIDENTIAL

MUCH BEEN RUN OUT OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE DURING THE FIRST TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT (1974-77). THE RESULT HAS BEEN SOME TENSION BETWEEN THE TWO AND THE EMERGENCE OF DIFFERING VIEWS ON SOME POLICY ISSUES. (TINDEMANS HAS LITTLE ENTHUSIASM FOR SIMONET'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE A SPECIAL WESTERN ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR ZAIRE).

4. SIMONET'S AGGRESSIVE PERFORMANCE IS, APART FROM HIS PERSONAL AMBITIONS, AN ASPECT OF THE FACT THAT THE SECOND TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT BRINGS INTO HARNESS BELGIUM'S TWO LARGEST POLITICAL GROUPINGS, THE CHRISTIAN AND THE SOCIALIST PARTIES, WHICH ARE MORE NATURALLY RIVALS THAN PARTNERS. THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM UNDER WHICH THEY UNITED IS LOOSELY FRAMED, MASKING RATHER THAN RESOLVING DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF POLITICAL PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIVES. THUS THERE IS A BUILT-IN TENSION IN TINDEMANS II WHICH WILL TEST TINDEMANS' CONSIDERABLE SKILLS AS A CONCILIATOR AND MANIPULATOR.

5. ALL THIS BEING SAID, TINDEMANS' SECOND GOVERNMENT STANDS IN NO DANGER, IMMEDIATELY OR IN THE MEDIUM-TERM, OF BREAKING DOWN. IN PART THIS IS BECAUSE THE HARD CHOICES, WHICH EVERYONE PIOUSLY AGREES ARE IN THE OFFING, ARE STILL NOT YET AT HAND. BUT EVEN IF THE HOUR STRIKES AND POLITICAL BLOOD IS SHED, IT IS FAR FROM CERTAIN

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THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD SPLINTER, IF ONLY BECAUSE NO PLAUSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO LEO TINDEMANS AND HIS WELL-ORGANIZED, PURPOSEFUL CHRISTIAN PEOPLES PARTY AT THE LEADERSHIP OF THE NATION IS READILY APPARENT. THIS WILL BE ALL THE MORE TRUE LATER THIS WEEK WHEN BELGIUM'S TEN MILLIONS SATISFIEDLY VIEW IN NEWSPAPER PHOTOS AND ON TELEVISION SCREENS TINDEMANS SHAKING HANDS WITH PRESIDENT CARTER - THE FIRST BELGIAN PRIME MINISTER IN 40 YEARS TO GET AN OFFICIAL RECEPTION AT THE WHITE HOUSE. OLSEN

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